

The vagaries of Jewish thought about the neighbouring nations would make a lifetime's study for many scholars. If you think you are a chosen nation, you feel your difference from others quite sharply. This can lead to the evils of a superior attitude, which evokes hatred; and the Jews have always managed to put the backs of their neighbours up very effectively and still do. It also leads to a powerful attitude in times of oppression, and Israel has always been able to call on a fierce feeling of destiny in the minds and hearts of Jews.

The early signs are not different. The Bible is full of explanations of why things are as they are; explanations of places and their names, reasons for political alignments or social friction; stories to explain liturgical or ritual regulations, even accounts of body parts (like Jacob's injuring the sciatic nerve in a fight with God, which has led Jews to eliminate the sciatic nerve in butcher's meat. I think there are good reasons to eliminate nerves in butchery without the story, but let it pass!

The story of the elimination of Ishmael from the story of a chosen nation explains why Midianites and sundry other Arab tribes are not Jews; and yet gives them distant kinship because they are children of Abraham "by the slave girl".

The demoniacs (they are multiplied by two in Matthew's account, for reasons I cannot understand - it's his habit) in the Gospel today are not Jews, and the account of Matthew takes our eyes away from them, whereas Mark makes a considerable fuss of the (single) demoniac in his original story. Matthew is interested in the exorcism rather than the exorcised (Matthew is, of course, Jewish). The impressive picture of the pigs - in large number - going over the cliff like lemmings in horror at the demons residing in two human beings gives us an idea of the power of the demons, and the greater power of Jesus. That the Gadarenes implore Jesus to leave gives us an idea of their fear of his power.

In these two stories we can sense something of the clash between faith and unbelief as we experience it today. The adherents of a faith always have problems in communicating what they believe to others; faith traditionally evokes mistrust and scepticism in those who encounter it. This can leave believers feeling wounded and misunderstood, and they sometimes take refuge in a sense of superiority. Jesus stands out in this field of power. He speaks to people with compassion and understanding, seeking to find community with them rather than reinforcing barriers. Patiently he speaks with sinners, with authorities, with foreigners, with hostile authorities, with crowds, with congregations. He suffers their enmity with calm fidelity. He is a living lesson to us, who continue to take refuge in hatred or rejection, and give religion the bad name it still endures in Ulster, in Gaza, and in so many suffering places throughout the world. Jesus has gifts to give us in every area of our lives; but a very special one in this troubled area of relationship.

Lord, give your Church the breadth and depth, the height and length of your own divine mind. Make us apostles of understanding and communication wherever we are.